United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/9

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 November 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-60997 (E) 091211

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Statement

The Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society applauds the work of the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-sixth session to further the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges.

We recognize the painful reality that women throughout the world, particularly those in rural and poverty-stricken areas, are often oppressed, marginalized and victimized. Notably, many of these same women are also the unsung heroes of society. In the direst of circumstances, they quietly find a way to selflessly care for their children, their families and others. Their plight deserves our closest attention and best work.

Such women were among those mentioned by the Secretary-General on the International Day of Families on 15 May 2009. He stated that mothers played a critical role in the family, which was a powerful force for social cohesion and integration. The mother-child relationship, he added, was vital for the healthy development of children. Furthermore, mothers were not only caregivers but also breadwinners for their families.

Clearly, to empower mothers is to empower families, which are at the centre of any successful development effort. In 2004, the year designated by the General Assembly as the Tenth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, the Secretary-General emphasized the indispensable role that families played in development.

Families have major, albeit often untapped, potential to contribute to national development and to the achievement of major objectives of every society and of the United Nations, including the eradication of poverty and the creation of just, stable and secure societies (see A/59/176, para. 4).

We must not forget that the family is a vital partner in efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and the many other objectives set by the international community during the last decade (see A/59/PV.67).

Why the family is indispensable to development is explained in the Plan of Action on the Family in Africa, launched in July 2004 by the African Union, distilling centuries of experience.

In Africa, as a result of the family's multiple roles and functions, the centrality, uniqueness and indispensability of the family in society is unquestionable. For generations, the family has been a source of strength for guidance and support, providing members with a wide circle of relatives on whom they can fall back. In times of crisis, unemployment, sickness, poverty, old age and bereavement, most people rely on family as the main source of material, social and emotional support and social security. Therefore, the African family network is the prime mechanism for coping with social, economic and political adversity in the continent. For the African Union, the family remains the touchstone of all successful development.

Recognition that the family is the basic and most fundamental unit of society, a dynamic unit engaged in an intertwined process of individual and group development, justifies the need to place the African family at the core of society, which needs to be strengthened as part of Africa's development process.

The family continues to play a crucial role in Africa's development, and development efforts that are family-centred are key to sustainable socio-economic development.

It is imperative that the African family be well positioned to play a crucial role in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (see the Plan of Action on the Family in Africa).

Nor is the family's pivotal role in development restricted to the continent of Africa. Maria Sophia Aguirre, Associate Professor from the Department of Business and Economics of the Catholic University of America, in her article entitled "The family and economic development: socioeconomic relevance and policy design", asks the question, "Is the family relevant for economic development?" She answers that data from across countries and sciences seem to clearly suggest that the family should be the point of reference if sustainable development is to be achieved. This is not so because the family is a problem to economic development — it is the solution. It is within the family where human, moral, and social capital, all sine qua non conditions for an economy to develop, are either encouraged and nurtured or hampered. Children develop best within a family that is functional, i.e., with a mother and a father in a stable marriage. This means that the family is a necessary good for economic development, and thus it should be promoted and protected if sustainable development is to be achieved. At the same time, data across sciences also show that the breakdown of the family damages the economy and the society since human, moral, and social capital is reduced and social costs increased.

The Howard Center believes that in order to provide the maximum benefit for rural women — and the societies in which they live — around the globe, the policies and programmes created by the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-sixth session should be designed in the larger context of strengthening the institution that is the core of all successful development: the family.